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SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF INTERIOR SEIZES NEWS MAGAZINES
FOR PUBLISHING OPINION POLL ON THE KING'S
PERFORMANCE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Morocco's Ministry of Interior seized the August 1 editions of two influential weekly news magazines of the independent TelQuel group for publishing an opinion poll on the King's first decade in power. The Ministry also banned import of an edition of French daily "Le Monde" that also published the results. To justify its action, the Ministry of Interior cited Morocco's 1958 press code, which allows seizure of publications that violate public order or violate respect for the royal family or Islam. The Moroccan independent press has united in a strong reaction against the Ministry's action, which the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also criticized. Ironically, the poll in question showed 91 percent support for the King. Post recommends the Department comment on the seizure and provides suggested guidance in para 17. End Summary.

2. (U) On Saturday, August 1, all copies of "TelQuel" (French language) and "Nichane" (Arabic language) news weeklies, both owned and published by Ahmed Benshemi's TelQuel Group, were seized by the Ministry of the Interior during the distribution process. The August 4 edition of French daily "Le Monde" (a co-sponsor of the poll) was also barred from distribution in Morocco. The Ministry of the Interior cited Chapter 77 of the 1958 Moroccan press code in seizing the publications, while Communications Minister Khalid Naciri asserted in an August 1 statement that "the monarchy in Morocco cannot be the object of a debate, even by opinion poll." In an interview with France 24 TV on August 4, Naciri invoked Morocco's Constitution, which, he said, "obliges respect for the monarchy and the sacred character of the monarchy."

3. (U) TelQuel publisher Benshems, in a press conference in Casablanca on Monday, August 3, said this event is significantly damaging Morocco's image abroad and shows freedom of expression in Morocco is "not guaranteed." He also asserted that the destruction of 100,000 magazine copies will have serious financial consequences for his company. TelQuel's lawyer, in appealing the decision to a Casablanca court, claimed that a poll showing overwhelming approval for the King could hardly be deemed a threat to public order. However, on Tuesday August 4, the court backed the Ministry's action, stating "the complaint by the TelQuel group asking for the annulment of the Interior Ministry's decision is acceptable in its form but not in substance."

¶4. (U) Independent print media have followed the story closely, pointedly criticizing the ministries. The National Union of Moroccan Press (SNPM) issued a statement condemning the government's action, and SNPM President Younes Moujahid called for "passing a law in Morocco to regulate opinion polls on the basis of respect for professional and democratic principles." Moroccan social media networks and the blogosphere have exploded with criticism of the GOM's stance on polling. Independent Arabic-language daily "Akhbar Al Youm" asked, "Do Moroccan officials know that a ban in the Internet era is bizarre ... and that millions of people and readers have easy access to the contents of both TelQuel and Nichane via Facebook and Moroccan bloggers ...?" However, print media affiliated with political parties, even opposition parties, have avoided comment, as have electronic media outlets, most of which are government-affiliated.

¶5. (SBU) Embassy media contacts reiterated privately their public criticism of these developments. Ali Anouzla, director and publisher of independent Arabic-language daily Al Jareeda Al Oula, said, "Seizure of the two magazines was a big mistake by the Ministry of Interior, which is incapable of bringing legal proof for its accusation against the magazines." Taoufiq Boucahrine, publisher of independent Arabic-language daily

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Akhbar Al Youm, expressed great concern about the events, which he worries will damage Morocco's fragile reputation for press freedom.

¶6. (U) The French government, through a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, expressed "regret" for the seizure. The statement said, "We are surprised by this measure which we regret. We are particularly attached to freedom of expression, which is protected by the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Morocco has ratified, and its corollary, freedom of the press."

¶7. (SBU) Post provides the following language for a possible Department statement:

Begin text. We note with concern the recent seizure of two independent newsweeklies in Morocco, and the related ban on distribution of an edition of a French newspaper, for publishing an opinion survey. We encourage Morocco to continue working to develop a new media law consistent with modern information practices and technologies as well as with basic principles of freedom of speech and the press. End text.

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